



REPUBLICAN NATIONAL CONVENTION - GOP SAW OPPORTUNITY IN ST. PAUL, AND TOOK IT - WHETHER OR NOT CONVENTION PAYS OFF IN 2008, THE PARTY AGAIN KNOCKS DEMOCRATS FOR A LOOP

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The Minnesota Wild haven't even officially opened their season this year, but the first body check of 2008 has already been delivered at the Xcel Energy Center.

By the Republican Party.

Democrats had tabbed hundreds of hotel rooms, counted bus inventories and brought finance staff to the Twin Cities as recently as Sept. 16 to lay the groundwork for their 2008 national convention. They'd picked a venue. They were reportedly talking money with Xcel Center management and were trying to figure out if there were enough swanky hotel rooms to accommodate their best-heeled contributors.

Then Republican National Committee chairman Ken Mehlman and U.S. Sen. Norm Coleman skated up, pushed the Democrats into the boards and swept off with the puck.

It's getting to be a familiar political scenario in St. Paul, one of the bluest spots in what used to be a solidly blue state. John Kerry won the last presidential election in the city by 47 percentage points, 73 percent to 26 percent. Ramsey County posted a 63 percent vote for Kerry that year, second only to the 65.3 percent in St. Louis County on the Minnesota Iron Range.

But Republicans have scored some spectacular shorthanded goals in St. Paul: In 1996, Jack Kemp came to town to personally welcome then-Democrat and then-Mayor Norm Coleman to the Republican Party. He went on to succeed the late DFL standard-bearer Paul Wellstone in the U.S. Senate.

In 2004, they made another spectacular play, persuading lifelong Democrat Randy Kelly, then mayor, to not just endorse, but barnstorm the state on behalf of, the Republican president, who was in a neck-and-neck race in Minnesota at the time. With former New York Mayor Ed Koch and U.S. Sen. Zell Miller, Kelly made for a trio showing "bipartisan" support for George W. Bush.

And with this week's pre-emption of the expected announcement that the Democrats would be coming to Minnesota, the Republicans scored a hat trick.

"I don't know that it's so much a grand strategy as much as a series of circumstantially related events," said Chris Gilbert, a political science professor at Gustavus Adolphus College and a student of Minnesota politics. "I don't know that Norm ever really had roots that deep, and the Kelly endorsement still remains a mystery.

"But I think there is still a sense that the Democrats have a very slight advantage in Minnesota, and ... Republicans, feeling themselves as underdogs and needing to make a splash, I think that's a very useful strategy."

St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman, another lifelong Democrat, concedes there's some fertile ground for that in his city. He trounced Kelly last year in the wake of the Bush endorsement but says St. Paul still has "a significant presence of conservative Democrats" that Republicans can attract, if not convert.

"You look at the East Side and at Highland, and those Democrats are still there," Coleman said.

But if the Republicans have a grander plan, they haven't been letting on to it.

Jo Ann Davidson, who heads the national party's site selection committee, called the choice of the Twin Cities "strictly a business decision" at Wednesday's announcement.

Republican fundraiser and consultant Jeff Larson, the party's "point man" for the convention in Minnesota, attributed the selection to the Twin Cities' all-out effort to attract a convention. He singled out the Meet Minneapolis convention and visitors agency for putting together information on hotels and other accommodations.

"The cities and the convention bureaus just did a fabulous job," Larson said.

And he even acknowledged the help, albeit indirectly, of the Democrats, who were asking some questions about transportation and other details that helped the Republicans winnow their site list this week.

"It turned out to be a blessing that these two cities were trying to attract both conventions," he said.

State Republican Party chairman Ron Carey on Thursday attributed the decision in part to the Xcel Energy Center, noting that RNC chair Mehlman appreciated the new arena, RiverCentre's attached exhibit space and the Roy Wilkins Auditorium. "He said, 'I wish we'd had this in New York,' " Carey recalled of a tour of the downtown St. Paul complex.

But he wasn't beyond seeing some partisan advantage, either. Wednesday's surprise announcement was an example of Republicans' propensity to act, and quickly.

"We knew that we were going to have to act quickly or lose the Twin Cities," he said Thursday. "And we weren't afraid that we could pull the trigger and make it happen. That's part of what helps us win competitive battles."

But with two years before the next presidential election, Gilbert was dubious that the convention site would have any lasting political impact, directly or indirectly. The 2004 convention in New York City didn't move the political needle for Republicans in that state, the professor noted.

"To say that it actually would sway votes is something you say to help the locals feel good," Gilbert said. "But the likelihood of any discernible outcome is nil. The strategy isn't about four days in 2008. It's about the synergy between good local candidates and the eventual nominee, Republicans in the precincts across Minnesota and Wisconsin and the rest of the nation. That's really the target audience."

Republican National Convention

When: Sept. 1-4, 2008

Where: Xcel Energy Center, St. Paul

Attendance: About 30,000, including delegates, media, politicians, contributors, families and friends

Lodging: 17,000 to 20,000 rooms at more than 90 Twin Cities hotels

Democrats: The party will choose between Denver and New York for the site of its 2008 national convention.

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